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Polish trial assessed

The conviction and sentencing to jail of four members of the Polish secret police for the kidnap-murder of the Rev. Jerzy Popieluszko is another one of those seeming victories for law, order, and human decency in Communist totalitarian societies.

But this fiction is only believed by people who see potential goodness in the Communist system and, more frequently, by people who have no idea of history, particularly Soviet history and, even more germane, the history of the secret police and the

structure of party control in Communist countries.

First, hard as it may be to believe, while the secret police in most Communist countries may be a power in their own right, the fact is that a secret policeman's lot is not a happy one, whether he is in Moscow, Warsaw, Hungary, or Prague. The secret police chief and his underlings are always subject to arrest, demotion, shakeups, and, in the U.S.S.R., to

execution as a traitor, spy, or monster.

In the U.S.S.R., Lavrenti P. Beria, head at different times under Stalin of the NKVD and MVD, was executed soon after Stalin's death in March 1953, allegedly because he

had been working for the British secret service.

The real reason for his execution by his fellow members in the Soviet Presidium was their fear of the power, independent of the party, of the secret police, the possibility that the police might become an *imperium in imperio*, a state within a state. The secret police are always a potential threat to party power, especially during transitions in leadership.

Second, dumping on the secret police is a popular blood sport in totalitarian countries, often engaged in by party leaders and by the pop-

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ulace, as in Hungary during the 1956 uprising. The police can be blamed for everything rotten, thereby exonerating the Communist leaders, while the blame also signals the secret police not to go into business for themselves.

In other words, there is nothing new nor anything particularly significant about the conviction of the Polish security policemen, even though it was an open trial with most of the trappings of a Western courtroom. What the trial tells us is that there is an internal fight going on in the highest Communist echelons in Warsaw and in Moscow. As Michael T. Kaufman reported to *The New York Times* from Warsaw, "revelations about the crime itself, its

motives, and its circumstances, were incomplete."

The secret police history of the Soviet Union is instructive. In addition to the assassinated Beria, these security chiefs were executed:

- Genrikh G. Yagoda, NKVD chief from 1934 to 1936, shot at Stalin's order in March 1938.

- Nikolai I. Yezhov, NKVD chief from 1936 to 1938, executed sometime in 1940.

- Vsevolod N. Merkulov, NKGB chief in 1941 and from 1943 to 1946, executed in December 1953.

- Viktor S. Abakumov, MGB minister from 1946 to 1951, executed in 1954.

Soviet secret police chiefs who have been disgraced include:

- Aleksandr Shelepin, KGB chief from 1958 to 1961.

- Vladimir Ye. Semichastny, KGB chairman from 1961 to 1967.

With these executions, expulsions, purges, or demotions also came similar punishments for their underlings.

Only one Soviet police chief ever made it to the top, the late Yuri V. Andropov, who didn't last long because of illness. However, between his reign for 15 years until May 1982 as KGB head and his accession to the top Soviet post in December 1982, there was lapse of six months so that the police taint could be cleaned up.

To list the victimized secret police executives in the Soviet bloc countries since 1945 would take up too much space. Even in "independent"

Yugoslavia, Tito purged his longtime security chief, Alexander Rankovic, who was supposedly bugging Tito himself.

No matter how much the secret police are downgraded in totalitarian systems, they are desperately needed by these unpopular regimes. That is why Poland's security police will go right on, functioning as they are supposed to do but a little more cautiously, perhaps.

To put this trial in proper perspective, think of the propaganda value to the Jaruzelski regime of the announcement two years ago that the general was lifting martial law. But that was nonsense.

A totalitarian regime is martial law or rather no law at all. What is the difference in Poland between martial law and no martial law? Can Solidarity function freely? Can Lech Walesa function freely? The difference between martial law and no martial law in Poland is that Gen. Jaruzelski has told the Polish people, "If you don't want martial law, then enforce it upon yourselves."

Martial law can be lifted in a Communist society only when the party decides to institute a system of institutionalized law. A trial of Communist secret police will be a harbinger of democratic reform when a truly investigative and judicial process is introduced as part of a system of institutionalized law.

And such events will occur, to quote Nikita Khrushchev in another context, "when a shrimp learns to whistle."

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